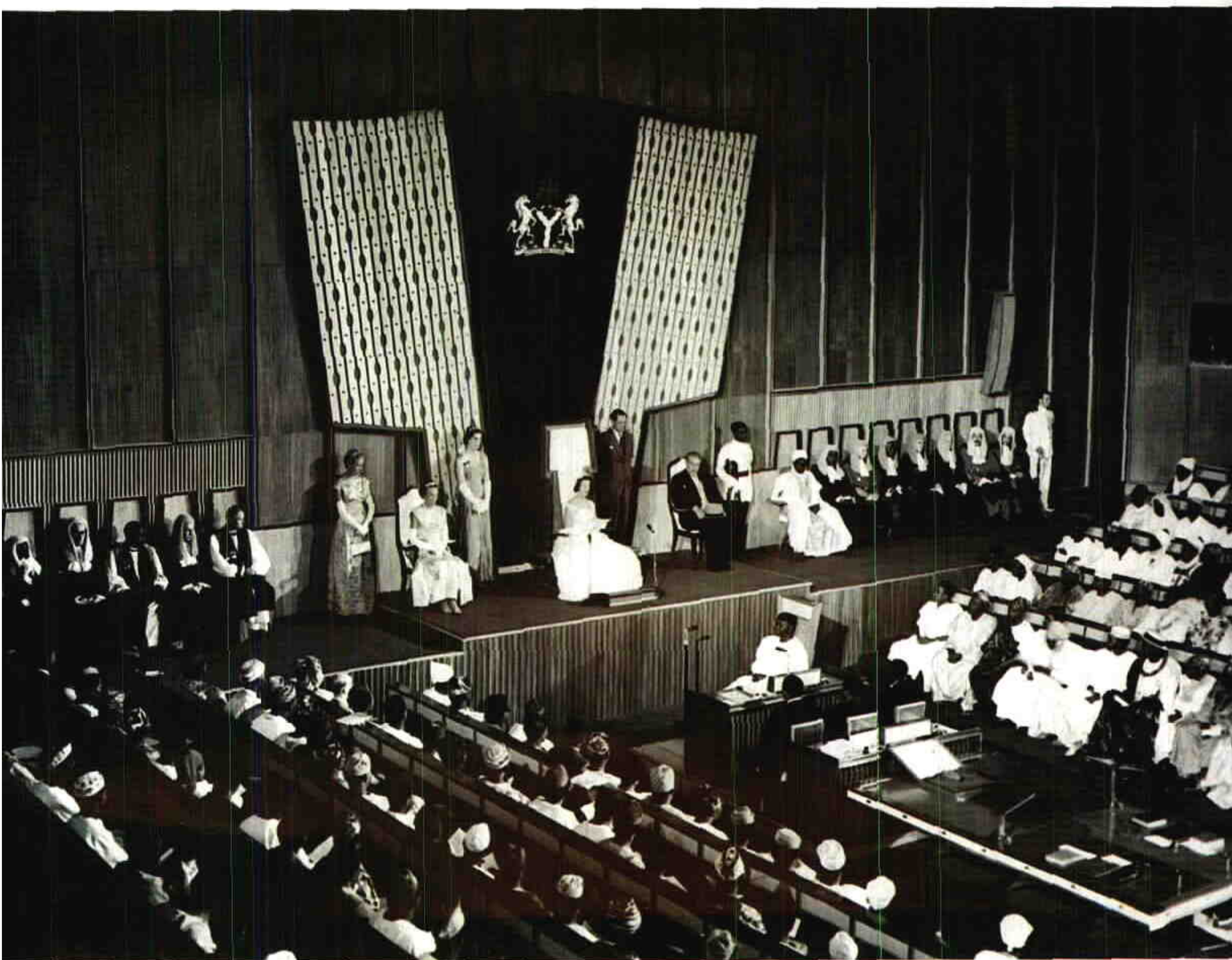


Nigeria why the 'British experiment' failed

Nigeria's current debilitating North-South problems have their roots in the pre-independence arrangements foisted on the nation by the departing colonial power.

Osei Boateng reports on Frederick Forsyth's re-worked book, *The Biafran Story*.



Britain's Princess Alexander declares Nigeria an independent state on 1 October 1960

How can Nigeria forget Frederick Forsyth. He is British. He is famous. He is a journalist turned novelist. And he has a story to tell. His book, *The Biafran Story*, (first published in paperback on 26 June 1969 by Penguin) raised quite a storm at the time. On 20 December last year, a re-worked edition of the book was published in hardback with a fresh Prologue and Epilogue. It is worth every Nigerian's attention, especially as they celebrate 42 years of independence.

Forsyth writes in the new Prologue: "It is now more than 32 years since the last plane I took out of the besieged and crumbling enclave that Biafra had become in December 1969 lifted away from the tarmac at Uli airfield and turned its snout towards Libreville, Gabon..."

"It is strange to read what I wrote all those years ago. With the marvellous gift of 20-20 hindsight, it is tempting to revise, re-edit and modernise the script; to temper the polemic, to mute the anger of the opinions.

"Yet I have not done so, for I was then a deeply angry young man, and with cause. I had seen such misery, so much starvation and death, so much cruelty inflicted on small children; and I knew that behind it all were vain and cynical men, not a few in high office in London, who had closed their eyes, hearts and minds to the agony of those children rather than admit they might have made a mistake."

Forsyth himself, a pro-Biafran, admits a mistake: "Biafra was a mistake," he now says. "It should and need never have happened. But I have resisted the temptation to be wise after the event, preferring the philosophy of the Beatles' song: let it be."

The first print-run of Forsyth's book, 30,000 copies, was sold out as quickly as it was printed. Thus, in September 1969, Penguin, through its representative, one Mr Hutchinson, asked Forsyth to return to Biafra and prepare an addendum.

"The idea was for a reprint in the spring of 1970, or so I understood," reveals Forsyth. He duly returned to Biafra in October 1969 and stayed for three months.

The addendum was ready by 31 December 1969, but Penguin had suddenly developed cold feet. Hutchinson had moved on to the academic field, and his replacement simply informed Forsyth that a reprint was no longer intended.

Censorship was not the preserve of newspapers after all. The book had been too hot to handle. So it took 32 years (till 20 December 2001) for the censored addendum to see the light of day; "to complete the story of Biafra", says Forsyth.

And what a story!

"The passage of time," Forsyth concedes, "may mellow viewpoints, or expediency may change them. But nothing can or ever will minimise the injustice and brutality perpetrated on the Biafran people, nor diminish the shameful of a British government's frantic, albeit indirect, participation...Victors write history, and the Biafrans lost. Convenience changes opinions, and the memory of Biafra and what was done there remains inconvenient for many."

Forsyth maintains that "all those who condemned [his book when it was first published in 1969] had one thing in common: they were all in positions of power and authority, to wit, the establishment, or firmly on the side of the establishment. That, to me, is its own commendation."

Even 32 years after the defeat of Biafra, Forsyth is still scathing of his home country, Britain, for what it did to Nigeria before and after

independence. "Although the immediate spark [of the war] had been political," he concedes, "the fundamental cause had been the tribal hostility embedded in this enormous and artificial nation. For Nigeria had never been more than an amalgam of peoples welded together in the interests and for the benefit of a European power."

Starting from 1450 with the Portuguese, a motley collection of European "freebooters" from France, The Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Germany, Spain and, finally Britain, had all left their mark on the land that would become Nigeria.

In 1879, Sir George Goldie, one of the British traders in Nigeria, had asked the British government, headed by the Liberal Party, to colonise Nigeria, but London had "demurred, believing colonies in such places to be an expensive waste of time".

Even after the Berlin Conference of 1844 that sparked the "scramble for Africa" by the Europeans, Britain was "still unwilling to saddle [itself] with another colony". Instead, in 1886, London granted Goldie's company a "charter of administration" over Nigeria.

For the next 10 years, Goldie pushed north and did deals with the Germans in Cameroon to extend northwards to Lake Chad in order to block the French expanding from Congo Brazzaville.

But that did not save Goldie. The French had conquered the whole Dahomey empire and were pushing eastwards into present-day Nigeria. And Goldie had neither the men nor the resources to halt the French, except to send desperate appeals to London for help.

The help came in the form of Frederick Lugard, who started as a freelance fighter and big game-hunter in East Africa, then annexed Uganda to Britain, sorted out Malawi and Tanzania, and retired as a knighted governor living on a pension paid by the British colonies in West Africa.

"Within a year," Forsyth writes, "Lugard had pushed the French out of Nigeria and war with France threatened.

The Niger crisis was settled by the Anglo-French agreement of June 1898, which established the basis for the new country's borders.

"Britain had gained a colony. It had not been conquered, it had not really been explored. It had no name, so later Lady Lugard gave it one — Nigeria.

"It was a land of great climatic, territorial and ethnic variety... In the western part of the south, the predominant group was the Yoruba, a people with a long history of highly developed kingdoms. Because of the British penetration through Lagos, Western culture first reached the Yoruba and other tribes of the west.

"In the eastern part of the south lived a variety of peoples, predominant among them the Ibos, who lived on both banks of the Niger, but mainly east of it. Ironically, in view of their later speedy development and progress which finally enabled them to overtake the other ethnic groups of Nigeria in terms of European-style development, the Ibos and the other peoples of the East were regarded as being more backward than the rest in 1900.

"North of the forest line was the woodland, verging into savannah grass and prairie, and finally to semi-desert and scrub. Along the southern fringe of this enormous area runs the Middle Belt, inhabited by numerous non-Hausa peoples, who were vassals of the Hausa/Fulani Empire.

"The North proper was the land of the Hausa, the Kanuri and the Fulani, the latter having originally come south from the Sahara in con-

"The British gave way to Northern isolationist demands but failed to see the danger."



The man himself: Frederick Forsyth

quest, bringing with them their Muslim religion."

Forsyth tells how Lord Lugard spent three years subduing the North, "conquering with his tiny force one emirate after another. The stiffest opposition was provided by the sultanate of Sokoto.

"Despite the greater numbers of the Fulani armies, Lugard was able to depend on superior firepower, as expressed by Belloc in the couplet:

'Whatever happens we have got/ The Maxim gun, and they have not'.

"Lugard's repeating-guns cut the Sultan's calvary to pieces and the last bastion of the Fulani empire in Hausaland fell."

Everything north of the Kabbah Line where Usman Dan Fodio's jihad and conquest of the Hausa kingdoms had been stopped by the British in 1840 became Northern Nigeria, occupying three-fifths of the land area of all Nigeria and having over 50% of the population.

"The enormous preponderance of the North," says Forsyth, "became one of the factors that later condemned the viability of a truly balanced Federation." Lord Lugard ruled the North (indirectly) through the Emirs who, jealous of losing their power, were steadfastly against change.

"It was no accident," Forsyth adds, "that in Independence Year, 1960, the North, with over half of Nigeria's 50-million population, had 41 secondary schools against the South's 842."

In fact, the first university graduate of the North qualified just nine years before independence. "To the Emirs, Western education was dangerous and they did their utmost to confine it to their own offspring or those of the aristocracy," says Forsyth. "In the 60 years from Lugard to Independence, the differences in religious, social, historical and moral attitudes and values between North and South, and the educational and technological gap, became not steadily narrower but wider, until the viability of a united country which would be dominated by either area became impracticable."

In 1914, Lord Lugard amalgamated the North and South as an act of administrative convenience — "on paper at least".

"To cause the minimum of administrative disturbance" (Lugard's own phrase), he kept the enormous North intact, and the two administrations separate. But the North did not have the qualified human resources to run the place, so it imported numerous British officials and technicians.

Yet "the gaps in society caused by Northern apathy towards modernisation could not be filled by the British alone," Forsyth continues. "There were posts which the Northerners could not fill. A few, but only a few, Yorubas from the Western Region went north to the new jobs. Most were filled by the more enterprising Easterners."

So by 1966, there were an estimated 1.3 million Easterners, mostly Ibos, in the North and another 500,000 had taken up jobs and residence in the West.

During this period, Britain's colonial policy had remained "traditional and orthodox: maintain law and order, stimulate the production of raw materials, create demand for British exports and raise taxes to pay for colonial rule," says Forsyth.

"It was only in the 15 years between 1945 and 1960 and notably in the last 10 years of that period, that a serious attempt was made to find a formula for post-independence. This attempt got off to a disastrously bad start and never quite recovered. The bad start was called the Richards Constitution. "It was the North that made it quite clear, and has maintained this attitude ever since, that it did not want amalgamation with the South.

"The North agreed to go along only on the basis that (1) the principle of separate regional development should be enshrined in the new constitution, and (2) that the North should have nearly 50% of the seats in the legislature (North 9, West 6, East 5)."

Northern opposition to amalgamation with the South was famously given voice in 1947 (the year of the inauguration of the Richards Constitution) by one of the Northern members of Sir Richards' team, Mallam Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, later to become prime minister. "We do not want, Sir, our Southern neighbours to interfere in our develop-

ment," he had said. "I should like to make it clear to you that if the British quit Nigeria now at this stage, the Northern people would continue their interrupted conquest to the sea."

That was a bad omen. So, from a unitary state ruled by a central legislative authority, Nigeria became a three-region federal state in 1947.

"The three-regional state," says Forsyth, "was the worst of all possible worlds once the attitude of the North had been ascertained: an attempted marriage of the irreconcilables."

"The North also demanded and obtained the loosest possible form of federation and made no secret of their deep conviction that the amalgamation of North and South in 1914 was an error."

"In March 1953, the Northern political leader, Sir Ahmadu Bello told the House in Lagos: 'The mistake of 1914 has come to light, and I should like it to go no further.'"

"What the Northerners were demanding, and apparently with the will of the overwhelming body of Northern opinion behind them, was a Confederation of Nigerian States. This was what Colonel Ojukwu, military governor of the Eastern Region, asked for at Aburi, Ghana, on 4 January 1967, after 30,000 of the Eastern people had been killed and 1.8 million driven back to the East as refugees."

Again, according to Forsyth, "the British gave way to Northern isolationist demands, but failed to see the danger in the North's unwillingness to integrate. So a British compromise prevailed. It was the Southerners who wanted a state with several regions in it to give the forthcoming federation a political equilibrium."

"The British government argued for three — North, West and East, the most unstable option of them all, but also the wish of the North."

Five difficult years of negotiations followed the 1954 constitution (the fifth constitution) about the future form of Nigeria.

Finally, on 1 October 1960, Nigeria "stumbled into independence, loudly hailed from within and without as a model to Africa, but regrettably as stable behind the gloss as a house of cards," Forsyth says. "None of the basic differences between North and South had been erased, nor the doubts and fears assuaged, nor the centrifugal tendencies curbed. The hopes, aspirations and ambitions of the three regions were still largely divergent, and the structure that had been devised to encourage a belated sense of unity was unable to stand the stresses later imposed upon it."

"Already in 1957 after the last of the constitutional conferences, a federal prime minister had been appointed. He was Alhaji Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, a Hausa, deputy leader of the NPC and up till that time minister of transport."

"There was no surprise that Sir Ahmadu Bello, leader of the majority NPC, who could have had the post for himself, refused to come south and head the country. As he himself said, he was quite content to send his

'lieutenant' to do the job. "The phraseology indicates the future relationship between the federal prime minister and the premier of the North, and where the real seat of power lay." And this, in fact, has not changed very much in 42 years of independence."

It is here that Forsyth cannot forgive the British. "The brief history of Nigeria under parliamentary rule," he writes, "has already been well documented. What seems to emerge from all the accounts, although it



Federal government troops jubilate after defeating the Biafrans

is seldom so expressed, is that the traditional form of parliamentary democracy worked out in Whitehall proved to be unsuitable to the existing ethnic group structure, incomprehensible even to its local practitioners, inapposite to African civilisation and impracticable in an artificially created nation where group rivalries, far from being expunged by the colonial power, had been exacerbated on occasion as a useful expedient to indirect rule.

"At the time of Nigeria's independence, Britain was pleased to claim much of the credit for the seeming early success of the experiment. Britain cannot now avoid much of the responsibility for the failure, for Nigeria was essentially a British and not a Nigerian experiment."

"For years, Whitehall's political thinking on Nigeria had been based on a resolute refusal to face the realities, an obstinate conviction that with enough pulling and shoving, the facts could be made to fit the theory, and a determination to brush under the carpet all those manifestations which tend to discredit the dream. It is an attitude that continues to this day." ■ **NA**

The Biafran story, by Frederick Forsyth is published by Leo Cooper, an imprint of Pen & Sword Books Ltd, 291 pages, £16.95 hardback. Email: sales@pen-and-sword.com Tel: 01226 734 222 or 01226 734 555